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Christianity and War

A SERMON

by

SHEPHERD KNAPP

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Worcester, Mass.,
March 13, 1917.

My dear Dr. Knapp:

Having been very much impressed by your sermon of last Sunday morning, and believing the message it conveyed is one which should reach out beyond those who were privileged to hear it, and also a message which those who heard it could read and consider again to their benefit, we request and urge you to put it in printed form for distribution.

If you will do so, and will so advise us, it will give us pleasure and great satisfaction to see to it that the expense of so doing is taken care of.

Sincerely yours,

G. W. Mackintire,
C. W. Hobbs,
Charles F. Fuller.

Rev. Shepherd Knapp, D.D.,
Worcester, Mass.

Lit
Author
APR 25 1917

Christianity and War

> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?—*Romans 8: 35.*

You may think that this is merely a classic quotation from a document nearly two thousand years old. But, as a matter of fact, it states a question that is about as up-to-date as any question could be.

You will see this at once, if you leave out the middle part of the text, and bring the two ends of it together. Though, for that matter, even the middle part sounds up-to-date enough—"tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril." Haven't our newspapers been full of just these things for two years and a half? What else do we think and talk about but the War, and its methods and results, of some of which this list of words gives a fairly accurate description? But we will not stop just now to dwell upon that. Leave out all that middle part of the text, and bring the two ends of it together. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?—shall the sword?"

"The sword" is the symbol of war, and "the love of Christ" is the essential, controlling principle of the Christian religion. To ask, then, whether the sword shall separate us from the love of Christ is as much as to say, "Shall war separate us from Christianity?" Is there such an irreconcilable conflict between war and Christianity that we can have only one of them at a time? Does going to war mean inevitably going from Christ? Perhaps we may expect the answer "Yes" to this question; or is the fact, rather, that we ask it, as Paul did originally, with the confident intention of drawing out the answer "No!" "The sword shall *not* separate us from the love of Christ." If we Americans actually do go to war with the Central Powers of Europe, as every day looks more likely and seems more near, do we believe that we can take our Christianity with us? And if so, on what terms?

Are Christianity and War Irreconcilable?

There are, I know, some of our fellow-countrymen who believe that we cannot do this. They think that this assumption of a possible harmony between Christianity and war is a delusion. These people belong to two classes, as wide apart as the poles in their view of war, except in this one matter of the relation of Christianity to it. On the one hand, they are the extreme pacificists, the peace-at-any-price men, who maintain that Christianity is utterly and eternally opposed to war, and that, therefore, there must be no more war of any sort, for any cause. On the other hand, there are those who have this same belief as to the irreconcilable conflict between war and the Christian religion, but who do not themselves believe in or accept Christianity, while they do believe in war, regarding it as useful, or at least necessary. These, therefore, propose to push Christianity to one side, in order to give war the right of way.

What Christianity Condemns.

Now, in defense of the view in which both of these divergent groups unite, namely that war is absolutely inconsistent with Christianity, there is, of course, much that may be said. There is surely no need in this day of the world to urge the terribleness of war. War's horrors, instead of being mitigated by the progress of civilization, as we used to hope they would be, have been increased by them, and to an extent which even actual experience has hardly made credible; while the ancient iniquities, which were war's accompaniment in the days of savagery, though checked or prevented at some points, break out again with concentrated fury at others, and lead to the perpetration of such gigantic deeds of cruelty that the imagination stands aghast before them. We are beginning, even in America, to realize in practical ways what it means to have a dozen nations work furiously day and night, year after year, destroying the products of the world's industry. And to some extent we appreciate the wicked loss to the world through year after year of scientific wholesale destruction of human life; but probably only the first rudiments of that awful lesson have as yet come home to us. What the lowering of the physical standard of the race for generations to come is going

to mean, we can only guess and fear. And then, the millions of shattered homes and hearts; the hatreds, impulsive or purposely engendered, and registered in hateful deeds which will not soon be forgotten or forgiven.

But what is the need to pile up the proofs, that the passions and destructive results of war are hideous, demoralizing, damnable? And who can fail to see that the religion of Jesus Christ, and the Christian Church in which his followers are enrolled, must work with might and main to rid the world of this incubus, this curse of human life?

For this reason it is absolutely clear that at least all wars of conquest, all wars of aggression for material gain, all wars for the acquisition of already occupied territory, are utterly repugnant to Christianity; and that the Christian who countenances a war of that sort is a traitor to his Christian allegiance. As well should an individual propose to make his living by murder, as a nation set out to improve its material position by war.

In precisely the same way, all wars of vengeance stand condemned by Christianity. This does not mean wars waged for the purpose of righting past wrongs, or in order to put an end to existing oppressions and iniquities, but it means wars which, beyond that, undertake to inflict as much suffering as has been endured, to broil the enemy on his own gridiron, after it has been wrested from his hand. Wars of that sort are unchristian, and the followers of Christ are bound, in loyalty to their professed religion, to refuse, condemn, and oppose them.

Moreover, it is not only the war that begins as a war of conquest or a war of vengeance, that calls for Christian opposition, but also the war that degenerates into that, as it goes on. And many wars do thus degenerate, often by the intention of designing leaders, who hid their real motives and purposes, until the nation was committed.

Does Christianity Condemn All Wars?

But why, for similar reasons, is not Christianity radically opposed to all wars? For certainly Christianity is passionately opposed to the evils and the miseries which all wars produce. More than that, is not one of the main interests of Christianity the establishment of an entirely different method

of human progress, which its Founder taught and practiced, a method which is the very antithesis of armed force, the method of service, the appeal to man's higher nature, the overcoming of evil with good? Why, then, is not Christianity unalterably opposed to war of every sort?

When War Is the Only Way.

The reason is simple and practical. It is because there are some things necessary to be done in order to save the world from ruin, and perhaps even some necessary steps in the world's upward progress, which cannot at present be accomplished in any other way than by war. Every once in a while in the world's history there is attempted or perpetrated some intolerable injustice which there is simply no way of preventing or ending except by war. War was the only thing that could turn back the Persian invaders of Greece at Thermopylae. War is the only thing that can force the Germans out of Belgium to-day. The method of Christianity simply has no chance to be applied to such instances.

This is most clear in cases like those just cited, in which the need is to defend against aggression; for when, instead of that, it is a case of going out to produce by force of arms some change for the better, not yet achieved, it is always a question whether there is not some other way, slower doubtless, perhaps much slower, yet practicable, by which the same result could at length be attained. There is always the possibility here of evolution as a substitute for revolution, of slow steady pressure instead of sword-stroke and gun-shot. And to such a possibility as that the Christian is always bound to give the fullest and most earnest consideration. He is false to his Christian standard of human conduct, if he countenances an unnecessary war.

But when it is a matter of defending human rights against the destroyer of them, there is often no chance whatever to do anything but strike; it is either make war or be destroyed.

This may be illustrated, in principle, in individual experience, and even in regard to no vaster concern than a man's saving of his own body. If a man, who has the good fortune to be armed, is attacked by savages on a South Sea island, or by thugs in a dark and lonely street in America, is he justified

in shooting, even though he is a Christian? He certainly is; and those who try to apply to this such a saying of Jesus as that which commands Christians to "turn the other cheek," on the supposition that the profound rule of life expressed in that command is applicable to every situation in human experience without exception—those who do this make Christianity ridiculous.

And what is true in regard to the mere self-preservation of the individual, when murderously attacked, is equally true in the case of the preservation of the great human rights and hard-won blessings shared by the many citizens of a nation—freedom, justice, righteous government, the safeguards and energies of an advanced civilization—when these in like manner are murderously attacked, by armies advancing with cannon and ammunition, or navies with submarine and torpedo. This, as clearly as the case of the individual defending his life, is not a situation in which Christ says to his followers, "If any man would take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also." To apply such a word to such a case is simply unintelligent. For the only instrument that Christianity can use in such a case, to defend the chief products of her own age-long endeavor, is war, to oppose in arms the enemy which advances to the attack.

The Last Chance of Another Way.

Assuming, of course, that the attacking enemy is so strong that no other form of opposition except war can defeat its hostile purpose. If the attacking nation is not as strong as that; if, therefore, there are other means besides war of checking and restraining it, means more in harmony with Christian principle and practice; then the Christians of the nation attacked are bound by their Christianity to try first the other means. As long as there is a fair chance that some more Christian method of restraint will achieve the desired purpose, Christians are bound to defer the extreme expedient of war; and for them to claim that the first act of war from the other side relieves them of all further responsibility in the matter, and that they need no longer take the trouble to seek or try any other way of achieving their purpose, is like the attitude of the man who said that, being a Christian, he had

always been perfectly honest, until he found himself in serious financial straits; then, of course, he helped himself in the best way he could.

No, a Christian nation is bound to use Christian methods just as long as they are practicable, no matter how tedious they may be, nor how much self-restraint that policy may call for.

Our human race has come tolerably near to accepting this standard of conduct in the sphere of individual relationships. We do not attack the bodies of individual evil-doers, till all the processes of law and order have been exhausted; and even though every year a large number of crimes are still committed, we do not therefore begin to make war on criminals: we still employ the method of arrest and trial, though our patience is often exasperated by the slow and incomplete results.

If Christian civilization has thus taught us to restrain ourselves in the use of force against individuals, how much more must the same restraint be demanded in the use of such a vastly more terrible form of force as war is, involving, moreover, as it does, not only the actual evil-doers, but a multitude of innocent people on both sides of the conflict.

But What Other Way Is There?

The objection, however, will very naturally be made that, while all this insistence on Christian restraint, and on deferring war to the last possible moment, till every other practicable expedient has been tried, is sound enough in theory, yet in practice it is of little consequence, for are there, as a matter of fact, any other practicable expedients? Is there at the disposal of nations anything except war, by which, in cases of serious international wrong-doing, the criminal can be controlled? There are treaties, of course. But have not treaties been declared by one of the leading nations of the world to be "scraps of paper," and have they not been dealt with as such? There is also talk of some sort of League of Nations, involving the establishment of an international police force, and many leading men in different parts of the world have great hope of this plan; but it lies in the future; it gives us no present help. With nations as uncontrolled as they now are, therefore, and as bent on the selfish use of their powers, what is there but war, it may be said, that can be used to restrain or coerce them?

There is a good deal of foundation for this pessimistic view, it must be confessed, and yet we surely know that the situation is not as universally and entirely hopeless, short of war, as this view would make it. We know that treaties, and faith between nations, and sensitiveness to the demands of international justice, have by no means gone wholly out of fashion. We Americans know that there are nations with which at the present day there is no need for us to go to war in defense of our rights. England in the course of this present European conflict has committed many unwarranted acts against our commerce, but we have no thought that war is the remedy; we believe that the English nation is still bound by those principles of international justice which at length led to the payment of the Alabama claims.

Yes, you say, but come to the main point. How about Germany? Has there been any sign that anything but war can speak to Germany in a language that she will pay attention to? Yes, even Germany has, almost up to the present day, shown some sensitiveness to the public opinion of the world—not much, it is true, but it has been appreciable, and has had its practical effect in modifying or deferring the unlawful acts which her self-interest was all the time urging her to commit. And as long as this was true, it was possible to use other means than that of war to restrain and oppose her.

Possible, that is, for the United States, on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. The same possibility was not open at all to Belgium and France, with only a boundary line between them and her. Nor was it open to Great Britain, for whom the English Channel would be hardly more defense than a mere boundary line, from a Germany once in undisturbed possession of the coasts of France and Flanders. For those three nations there was no alternative but war.

And there would have been none for us, had Germany been where Canada is, or had Mexico been a Germany. But Germany being, not on our northern border, but in Europe, and busy there; and Mexico, though close to us, not having Germany's power to wage a successful war against us whether we wished a war or not—these things being true, there have been during these recent eventful years other methods besides war by which the enemies of our rights could be held in check. To have neglected these, and to have chosen war instead, would have been unchristian.

Suppose the Other Way Does Not Succeed.

But when those methods have been tried, and faithfully and persistently and thoroughly tried, not merely to the limit of human patience, but to the moment which proves that they have ceased to be effective, and then America stands at the bar of Christianity, and asks, "What now?"—Christianity answers "War." And when that moment comes, if come it must, Christianity's word to America will not be, "Now you may fight," but, "Now you must fight." If, up to that fateful hour of decision, we shall, as a nation, have followed unswervingly the lead of our religion, step by step, we shall not only be able to take Christianity with us, when we go to war, we shall go at her command; we shall march as her soldiers; we shall fight her battles.

Apply All This to America.

It will not have escaped you that the national procedure which I have outlined, as that which is dictated by loyalty to Christian principles, corresponds in all its main features to that which has actually been followed by the President of the United States in our recent relations with Germany and with Mexico. In the minds of some of you this fact will not help to commend the arguments and conclusions which I have presented, for you do not approve of President Wilson's policies, foreign or domestic; you do not trust his judgment, you feel out of sympathy with his methods, and you are of the opinion that, in any case, the motive which has prompted him to follow his chosen course has not been unswerving devotion to a high sense of national duty, united to a firm purpose to uphold the justice and freedom for which America stands, but rather that he has been guided by expediency, or even by timidity, or has been the victim of a temporizing indecision.

To this it is not fitting for me in this place to say more than that, personally, I hold with those who believe the President's policy to have been dictated by a clear and consistent sense of America's high moral obligation, both as to what ought not to be done, and as to what ought to be done. But leaving that at one side, what I am bound to declare without any reservation or hesitation whatsoever, and do declare with

all the directness and force at my command, is my conviction that, whatever the reason or lack of reason for the President's foreign policy, whatever his motives, whether high or low, the course by which he has led the nation through these eventful years has been in its essential points the course which Christianity would prescribe.

Can We Keep Christian to the End?

And, now, in conclusion, I urge upon you, with ever greater earnestness, that the need to listen intently, and with a passionate obedience, to the dictates of our religion, instead of being lessened at the stage of affairs which we have now reached, is rather intensified. Nor, if our armed defense of the rights which Germany has trampled on are met by further aggression on her part, until at last she forces war upon us, can we then relax our anxious striving to be Christians in every word and deed. Rather then will come the severest test of all. To make war, month after month—war, with all that that implies, and still to keep Christian in the motive of every aim and act, there is a test that will challenge our utmost of moral and spiritual energy.

God help us, at every moment of the unknown future which lies ahead, wherever it may lead, to be able to say, with deep sincerity and ringing truth, "The sword has not separated us from the love of Christ."

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